

VZCZCXRO7788
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0288/01 0711612
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 121612Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4419
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3576
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3779
RHMFSS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000288

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY, KAHL, DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WHAT IS IMPACT OF THE DISAGREEMENTS IN
THE OPPOSITION?

REF: BEIRUT 00233

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) There has been speculation in the media and among political observers about disagreements within the March 8/Aoun opposition coalition as its members prepare candidate lists for the June 7 parliamentary elections. There have been claims of disagreements between Christian opposition leaders Suleiman Franjeh and Michel Aoun, Shia partners Hizballah and Amal, and Aoun and Amal. For their part, opposition leaders have accused March 14 and the international community of seeking to sow discord, or the appearance of discord, within opposition ranks. This cable seeks to explore possible fracture points in the opposition and any potential impact on elections.

2. (C) In addition to the formation of electoral lists, there have been apparent disagreements on one-day voting and the mechanisms of forming a government post-election. Long-term fractures could appear because of Syrian and Iranian influence in the opposition and also individual leaders' likely emphasis on self-preservation at the expense of the electoral alliance. Despite these disagreements, our assessment is that the opposition alliance -- with Hizballah, Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement at its core -- will remain intact for the election. End summary.

ELECTORAL LISTS
CAUSE SPARKS

3. (C) Contacts assess that while disagreements are likely among opposition leaders as they begin forming electoral lists, coalition discipline will ensure that most of the debate will occur, in general, away from the spotlight. One disagreement, an open secret, revolves around who gets to name the Christian representatives in southern districts, Christian leader and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) head MP Michel Aoun or his opposition ally Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. Berri historically has selected candidates for Christian seats in areas where his Amal party dominates, but Aoun is insisting on naming Christian candidates in order to prove to his Christian supporters that he (and only he) represents their interests.

4. (C) Discussing how Aoun and Berri will reach an agreement, FPM member Alain Aoun (Christian) told us the opposition would conduct opinion polls in districts where candidates were disputed. Whoever's candidates proved more popular, they would represent the opposition. Berri's advisor Ali Hamdan (Shia), however, complained that Aoun was "overstepping his reach," by pushing for candidates in areas Amal considered its strongholds. Pro-Syrian Ad-Diyar paper reported February 25 that Aoun met with Hizballah SYG Nasrallah to settle "complications" related to parliamentary seats, a sign that Hizballah might have to settle the various disputes among its allies in the opposition.

5. (C) Three districts that have or probably will spark disputes among opposition members -- Jezzine, Zgharta, and Aley -- are highlighted below. Disputes in these areas, however, are not expected to cause the opposition as a whole to crumble.

JEZZINE

16. (C) Contacts have cited Jezzine as a district where there is a dispute between Berri and Aoun. It is thought that Berri hopes to keep the right to name the two Christian seats in Jezzine -- held by Amal-allied incumbents -- as they provide a small level of cross-confessional validity to his mainly Shia Amal movement. Aoun is seeking the right to name

BEIRUT 00000288 002 OF 003

the seats as a way to bolster his position as the Christian figurehead in the opposition and refute claims that he is a "tool" in the hands of his Shia allies. Some contacts even have speculated that Aoun may run a separate list against Berri in Jezzine, but we would find that highly surprising.

17. (C) Hizballah might side with Aoun as a means of gathering more Christian supporters to the opposition coalition. Hizballah has been quiet publicly on details of electoral lists

ZGHARTA

18. (C) There are reports that Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh (Christian) and Aoun differed on who should be on the list in heavily Christian Zgharta. Aoun favors Sayez Karam, who was in exile with Aoun in France. Franjeh, however, supports another candidate. Contacts have told PolStaff that, given overwhelming support for Franjeh in Zgharta, Aoun will back down.

ALEY

19. (C) In Aley, opposition disagreement has centered on Druze leader Talal Arslan. Arslan told Emboffs in March that he had supported a compromise deal with March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt involving Aley and Baabda. Arslan hoped to keep his seat in Aley by agreeing that his opposition allies would not challenge Jumblatt's candidate in Baabda. Arslan said he was "strongly rebuked" by Aoun and Hizballah for his proposal. The voter confessional breakdown in Baabda requires Arslan to obtain buy-in from Aoun and Hizballah for his plan.

DIVERGING ON
ONE-DAY ELECTIONS

10. (C) Besides electoral list formations, opposition members also have differed over the mechanics of elections, specifically on whether elections should be held on one day (parliamentary elections had historically been spread over four successive Sundays). Aoun publicly questioned the ability of Lebanese security services to hold elections without incident on only one day and expressed his support for elections instead to take place over two days.

11. (C) Although Labor Minister Mohammed Fneish (Hizballah) acknowledged in late February that Aoun's concerns about security for one-day elections were justified, Hizballah publicly supported elections in one day. Christian Marada Forces head Suleiman Franjeh has publicized his preference for one-day elections as well.

12. (C) Aoun's separating from Hizballah on this issue could help him among Christians nervous about his alliance with the Shia party. Hizballah's acknowledgment of Aoun's concerns validates his somewhat "independent" stature. Moreover, by leaving the final decision to the GOL on security capabilities, Aoun leaves a way for one-day elections to occur without incurring a "loss."

AOUN QUIET ON NATIONAL
UNITY GOVERNMENT

13. (C) Hizballah and Amal have been vocal in calling for the formation of a national unity government following elections, but Aoun thus far has been less outspoken on the issue. Aoun publicly supported the formation of a national unity government after elections, but said he would not force March 14 to accept the arrangement. Aoun's lack of enthusiasm on the topic probably stems from his unwillingness to cede ministerial seats to March 14 Christians in a national unity government, particularly if the opposition wins elections.

BEIRUT 00000288 003 OF 003

14. (C) Berri and Hizballah, on the other hand, maintain a monopoly over Lebanese Shia and would not have to cede any Shia seats to March 14 in a national unity government should the opposition win. March 14 leaders Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt have admitted to us that the few Shia in the March 14 camp are not seen as representative of the Shia sect as a whole.

AOUN-BERRI
CLASH DESTINED?

¶15. (C) According to independent pollster Jawad Adra, Aoun is "destined" to clash with Berri. In fact, Adra posited that a clash with Berri was in Aoun's interest. Aoun, by succeeding as a leader without the support of Sunni Future Party leader Saad Hariri, demonstrated Christian triumph over the Sunnis. By flaming fears of Sunni extremism and Palestinian resettlement (tawteen), Aoun has brought Christians even closer to him.

¶16. (C) By clashing with Berri, Aoun would prove himself again as the protector of Christians -- this time over Shia domination -- without actually endangering his alliance with the stronger Shia ally, Hizballah. Aoun's strength is valuable to Hizballah, as it re-emphasizes the opposition's claim of cross-confessional representation. Hizballah may assess that given its dominance among Lebanon's Shia, Aoun brings a more important aspect to the alliance than its weaker Shia ally, Berri.

¶17. (C) Aoun's outspokenness against Berri about judicial appointments in recent days could indicate Aoun is beginning to exert his independence from the Speaker. After the weekly FPM meeting March 9, Aoun strongly criticized Berri for his acquiescence on the appointments, which Aoun said were highly politicized. Aoun accused Berri of knowing about the appointments ahead of time and agreeing to the selections, despite his allies' opposition to the names.

LONG-TERM SPLIT
OVER SYRIA-IRAN POSSIBLE

¶18. (C) While there may be some more signs of daylight between Aoun and Berri before elections, the two likely will remain allied for the election and after, whether as allies in the majority or in the opposition. Longer term, some observers tell us they see the seeds of disagreement between Hizballah and Amal if the countries identified with supporting them, Iran and Syria respectively, drift apart over, say, Syrian rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. One issue to watch for signs of such a disagreement: the selection of the next Speaker of Parliament, the senior GOL position designated for Shia. The current speaker, Amal's Nabih Berri, wants to become speaker again.

¶19. (C) Actors in the opposition -- and also in March 14 -- likely will remain allied with each other for the short-term interest of winning elections. Potential independent Maronite candidate in Beirut I district, Massoud Ashar, explained the phenomena by separating electoral alliances from political alliances. He noted that, although he was an independent candidate and disagreed with Aoun's alliance with Hizballah, he would likely ally with Aoun in June 2009 elections for tactical electoral reasons. Ashar, however, did not plan to remain in Aoun's camp over the long term.

¶20. (C) Many candidates, similar to Ashar, place short-term personal victory over ideology. MP Nicholas Fattoush, who ran in 2005 on March 14's list, told Poloff he is deciding which list to join in 2009 based on where his chances of winning are the strongest.

SISON